Could we save Earth if we treated it like a child? We are in crisis and need to heal the planet.

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Byline: Kealoha Fox, Maya Soetoro-Ng and Zelda Keller

Body

As mothers, we have often felt engulfed by the gnawing worry of climate change, the jagged feeling akin to that moment when you, as a mother, drop off your child in the care of someone who hasn't yet earned your trust. You see your child's bright, observant gaze. Their nerves express concern to you with quiet messages designed to tug at your unique receptivity – a tight squeeze, a shifted foot, a tear in the corner of the eye. And you ask yourself: What if they are imperiled and unprotected when I am not present?

When we read the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports in February and April, which United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described as an "atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership," the anxiousness about our children's well-being was rekindled in all of us.

The three of us form the backbone of the Institute for Climate and Peace, a nonprofit organization based out of Hawaii focusing on the intersections between climate change and peace. We know how precarious the situation is. And we know that many of our leaders – well-intentioned as they may be – are ignoring the truest solutions to bring about peace and climate resilience. Central to our climate justice work is helping to frame the conversation about what peace is.

'Positive' peace can help heal planet

Historically, peace has been too often confused with the topic of security and defined simply as an absence of war and violent conflict, otherwise known as "negative peace." However, there is another type of peace: "positive peace," which means the presence of active systems and processes that allow human potential to flourish.

Many systems that led to positive peace were integral to ancestral communities but dissipated during the industrial revolution. Indeed, technology has provided many boons to civilization, but it has led directly to our climate crisis, and now technology alone cannot get us out of this emergency.

WHO director: With world in crisis, we must push for peace to save millions of lives

Positive peaceful climate solutions present the greatest opportunity to build social cohesion, create lasting commitments that survive beyond partisanship, and are sustained beyond each of us. Our work, which complements broad efforts to reduce emissions, focuses on locally rooted, more tailored measures. This includes things like the preservation or restoration of cultural assets on our coastlines, just and dignified migration, democracy building and gender inclusive leadership.

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Climate change presents differently in each community, as do the threats to peace and stability, so we believe a process, rather than a predetermined prescription, is the best answer, one that develops custom-designed remedies as well as trust and unity.

Not a reason to celebrate: U.N. climate change report says we're on the path to an 'unlivable' planet. WE DID IT!

The IPCC report highlights the need to reduce climate risks for the most marginalized through adaptation. However, its framing of front-line populations as inherently vulnerable and in need of top-down solutions and saving fails to make space for the positive peaceful solutions that are most successful and achievable. It also overlooks the inherent wisdom and lived experience of front-line communities and their ancestors.

This is not to say we shouldn't set ambitious goals grounded in science; it just means we cannot afford to neglect positive peaceful climate solutions grounded in social sciences if we are to truly build the shared future we imagine for our children.

To cite just one statistic: Natural disasters kill 13 times as many people in regions with low levels of positive peace (characterized by well-functioning governments, strong community relations and equitably distributed resources, among other indicators) than in regions with higher levels of positive peace.

Linking climate and social science

That is why our institute is dedicated to a new narrative: Climate science and social science are integrated, collaborative fields helping to advance community-based climate solutions for thriving, cohesive communities.

Through our research, training, educational workshops, policy guidance, community partnership development and mentorship of young women leaders, our intention is to be in the right relationship with each other and the Earth. We are certainly not the only organization engaged in peace work, but we are one of the few that recognize it as being inextricably linked to climate work. Our Pasifika communities have long promoted imaginative, place-based and interdisciplinary climate and policy initiatives.

Climate change: As Hawaii declares climate crisis, schools hope Indigenous knowledge will save the islands

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On the island of Oahu, we find community-led Indigenous systems regeneration and educational initiatives about the value of these sacred ecosystems through the wisdom of ancient Hawaiian protocols. On Lanai, a high school English teacher has worked to build intergenerational connections through a multiyear, student-led community research project about food sovereignty. Her work has helped to connect a small community's youth with its elders and revived locally grown, culturally significant produce like breadfruit.

We also see traditional technology at work through the restoration of sustainable mechanisms for catching fish, or reviving turtle populations using tide flow and deep-rooted aquarian knowledge.

Columnist Connie Schultz: I lost my sense of smell but I still inhale the world, and I like this version of me better

The communities and lands where these projects are based are now stronger, healthier, more connected and better prepared to face climate impacts with resilience. These projects are all examples of climate work, even though they are not explicitly designated as such, nor are they given the resources, attention and integration into larger-scale climate policy and funding initiatives they deserve.

Despite the demonstrated successes of locally based efforts like these, governments and philanthropies invest most climate finance in top-down and technology-centric approaches. An International Institute of Environment and Development assessment of climate finance between 2003 and 2016 estimated that less than 10% went to locally led climate change projects.

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One of the biggest reasons that gatherings like the U.N. Climate Change Conference or publications like IPCC reports fail to achieve large goals, or inspire global change, is because too few of the solutions they promote invest robustly in communal infrastructure that fosters healthy communication, compromise and the realization of shared goals.

Discover a deep care for the earth

The ancient Polynesians traversed the Pacific in double-hull canoes known as wa'a kaulua. Polynesians developed wayfinding, or open-ocean voyaging, to allow their cultures to expand and survive. Voyagers reached nearly every island in the central Pacific on these canoes. Covering more than 6 million square miles, the voyagers were guided by celestial navigation techniques, ocean currents, sea birds and wind patterns.

Nainoa Thompson, a contemporary Polynesian wayfinder, frequently speaks about the doldrums, which occur when hot air rises from an ocean belt causing long periods of utter stillness with no wind, followed by violent and severe storms with zero visibility. During doldrums, the boat might be moving very quickly in the storm while the crew is unable to see the way to safety. Thompson emphasizes how critical it is to reach beyond technical navigational skills like mathematics in these times and rely on other practices, including senses outside of vision, cues from the natural environment, the familial bond between the canoe's crew and one's instincts.

We liken the climate crisis to the doldrums. The forecast is bleak, and the horizon is indistinguishable.

Can Congress bag a cannabis bill? Marijuana legalization hopes may be soaring too high.

Instead of navigating the squall shoulder to shoulder with a sense of shared accountability, humans are on a shared voyage relying on purely technical solutions in order to find our way. While leaders of most states want to contribute to solutions, political, social and behavioral incentives encourage them to do so only in ways that limit burdens on their own economies and political systems. If we stay on this particular course, states will continue to negotiate minimal commitments, then fail to uphold them in the near or long term.

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Is there any alternative?

We must invest in positive peaceful climate solutions around the world. In essence, dividing the planet into smaller canoes where people come together to build stronger vessels that navigate even the most unknown reality beyond the horizon – beyond the doldrums.

Canoes where each person on board is appreciated as a contributing member of the crew, connected with one another and the natural environment through a familial-like trust. Boats where mothers might confidentally place their children on board trusting that each and every person, even if not a parent, would paddle with the same fervor that a mother would for her children. Our leaders in this scenario would bend their heads to the surface of the water, turn their ears to the sky and listen deeply to nature, one another and those who have had to withstand many storms.

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Learn to listen. This is the message we would pin to the sleeve of our children when placing them in the care of others. Even the quietest, distant of cries can awaken a mother from a deep sleep, and we must establish similarly visceral bonds for effective and just climate action.

There is a point deep within our bodies where our intellect and emotions meet at our core to ground us in the present. It is a feeling, location and knowingness at the same time. In Hawaiian, this is known as the na'au. For the three of us, it is this place in our bodies that gets activated when we listen to our children cry out or laugh, and when we step away from them.

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The key to undermining Putin? Divide his regime. Start by easing sanctions – with conditions.

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It is also the center from which we catalyze the human experience, act for our children and yours.

Climate work is not about watered-down commitments coldly discussed in the confines of a boardroom. Nor is it a tepid and wholly intellectual process. It is about knowing and feeling all that is at stake and helping others to discover this same source of deep care for the Earth – so that they, too, wake up in the middle of the night instinctually when they hear its cries and respond.

Kealoha Fox is a senior adviser with the Institute for Climate and Peace and is an Obama Leader: Asia Pacific with the Obama Foundation. She received her Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences from the John A. Burns School of Medicine.

Dr. Maya Soetoro-Ng is a co-founder at the Institute for Climate and Peace and a Faculty Specialist in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where she serves as the liaison to the Obama Foundation and works with the Foundation's Leaders program and Global Girls Alliance on initiatives in Hawai'i and the Asia-Pacific region.

Zelda Keller is executive director of the Institute for Climate and Peace. She also works with organizations to develop peacebuilding initiatives throughout the Pacific Asia region. She received a BA in Peace Studies from the University of Hawai'i, a graduate certificate in Asia Pacific Leadership from the East-West Center.

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